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## A Literacy Story: Mr. Stevenson Groups His Students for Guided Reading

Mr. Stevenson, a second-grade teacher, invites his literacy coach to observe his four reading groups and give him an outside perspective on whether the texts are appropriate.

Mr. Stevenson believes that his students are appropriately placed in groups; they all scored between 90% and 94% on word recognition in a benchmark book on the levels in which they are currently grouped for instruction. The students also passed the comprehension portions of the benchmarks, even though they consistently missed the questions that required them to make inferences or apply higher order thinking skills.

The literacy coach observes Mr. Stevenson and the students during guided reading over the course of a week and learns that the group in Level P does not consistently make inferences critical to understanding the text, and they usually don't notice when their reading doesn't make sense. The group working from Level M texts seems to be in appropriate texts that they manage with solid comprehension and an integrated, fluent reading process with little or no help from Mr. Stevenson.

The groups in Levels J and K, however, have significant issues managing the print demands of the text. When Mr. Stevenson prompts them specifically to try a series of strategies, they are able to figure out many of the words. Their work with print, however, interrupts their attention to story. Although they know generally what is happening in the story, there is occasional confusion that they leave unresolved unless Mr. Stevenson notices it, draws their attention to it, and helps them clarify.

The next day, when the literacy coach administers a set of running records, the readers working in texts at Levels J and K all score between 89% and 91% on word recognition. These numbers confirm for Mr. Stevenson that the students are in appropriate books. He explains that he feels that the difficulty of the text offers them the challenge they need to progress. His literacy coach, however, believes that the opposite is happening and that the struggles in which the students have to engage actually impede their progress.

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# Revisiting Instructional Reading Level

*To dig for treasures shows not only impatience and greed,  
but lack of faith.*

From *Gift From the Sea* by Anne Morrow Lindbergh

Some treasures are a matter of timing, others chemistry, and still others magic. Learning to read is a little of all three. But timing requires of us patience, chemistry requires experimentation, and magic, of course, requires faith. And when we dig for treasures, they can become contrived. In *Charlotte's Web* (White, 1999), the minister explains that “the words on the spider’s web proved that human beings must always be on the watch for the coming of wonders” (p. 85). These wonders happen daily in guided reading groups when students read from texts in which they can extend their own learning. But we find ourselves working for “wonders,” or digging for “treasures,” when students are in texts that are too difficult for them. Their success rests on our support, or our effort, rather than their independence.

Over 60 years ago, Betts (1946) coined the term *instructional reading level*. He first wrote of the appropriateness of text in his 1946 book *Foundations of Reading Instruction: With Emphasis on Differentiated Guidance*. He described instructional reading level as follows:

There should be no strain or fatigue at the instructional level. Criteria for evaluating reading performance at the instructional level include: I. a minimal comprehension score seventy-five percent, based on both factual and inferential questions, II. Accurate pronunciation of ninety-five percent of the running words, III. Ability to anticipate meaning, IV. Freedom from tension in the reading situation. (p. 449)

This definition of instructional reading level differs from the one most teachers utilize in guided reading today. Most prominently, the instructional shift from Betts's 95–98% word recognition accuracy to what is now the norm of 90–95% accuracy has introduced a level of text difficulty that we believe leads to inauthentic estimations of text appropriateness and seriously interferes with the progress of many students.

Allington (2006) reviewed research related to text appropriateness and student learning and found that the level of difficulty inversely relates to the learning. He further states that “many, many students are confronted daily by texts that are too complex for optimal learning” (p. 60). In contrast, many educators believe that, in instructional-level texts, “the difficulty of the text and tasks needs to be beyond the level at which the student is already capable of independent functioning” (Tyner, 2004, p. 32). We maintain that the work of guided reading needs to be mostly a habituation of the known, as the next stage in the gradual release is independence. If guided reading is beyond student skill levels, how then can they take these skills into independence?

This idea that guided reading text needs to be hard is often coupled with a contradictory philosophy: “Reading at the instructional level also allows students to build the use of effective cueing systems” (Tyner, 2004, p. 32). Reading difficult text, however, diminishes the orchestration of print and story, because the relatively independent functioning of the reader breaks down, hampering student opportunities to “build the use of effective cueing systems.”

Clay (1993) recommends “practice in orchestrating complex processing on just-difficult-enough texts,” stating that we need to provide students with “successful experience over a period of time moving up a gradient of difficulty of texts which can *support fluent and successful reading* [italics added]” (p. 53). The reading material must be well within the reader's grasp as the text, rather than the teacher, supports the learning of the student.

## The Myth of Challenge

Jan has two sons who are learning stringed instruments. Her 14-year-old is learning to play the cello, and her 7-year-old is learning to play the violin. They take lessons from different teachers with very different

philosophies of instruction. Jan's violinist, Natie, is learning with the Suzuki method, which increases difficulty with tiny increments and focuses attention on the processes of holding the violin, bowing, intonation, and so forth. Because the songs are simple, Natie can concentrate on multiple aspects of playing.

The 14-year-old cellist, on the other hand, has jumped into the deep end. Very early in his lessons, his teacher assigned him a difficult piece in the interest of giving him "something to sink his teeth into." Consequently, Christopher has struggled to get through the piece. Even though he has learned much about playing the cello, the difficulty of his practice material has compromised his ability to focus on integrating the many technical aspects of playing.

As a result, he has learned some inefficient habits that interfere with his progress. To a lay person, it would appear that Christopher is much farther along on the cello than Natie is on the violin. Christopher plays moderately difficult pieces and sounds pretty good, but to a knowledgeable cellist, it is obvious that he is struggling. He looks at his fingers, his hand positioning is inefficient, and his bow hold is incorrect. He would be much better off if his teacher had worked to solidify these and other foundational skills and processes with simple music rather than pushing him into something more difficult.

Musicians have since told Jan that a young string musician playing "Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star" with excellent posture, bowing, dynamics, and so forth will eventually surpass a student of music who is focusing on stretching to meet the short-term demands of getting through a challenging piece. The student working on process and simple music develops a feel for the whole, integrated effort, and this process becomes automated. The student consistently working at the extreme of his or her skills will usually adopt an inefficient, somewhat disjointed process, and eventually this inefficiency feels right to the student. Once this happens, even if the musician plays a simple piece, he or she will engage the same inefficient practices. So now, even if Christopher is playing "Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star," he holds his bow incorrectly and his posture is misaligned.

At some point, the student who spent a lot of time with challenging music has to back up and correct habits that he or she developed to compensate for efficient behaviors that he or she did not learn. For Jan's

young cellist, she has had to back up, purchase simpler materials, find a new teacher, and support Christopher as he tries to break habituated tendencies that are already pretty solidified. This relearning is not easy in music or in reading, and it can be disheartening for students of either.

Similarly, in reading, students who work in material that is challenging develop compensatory practices that help them manage the difficulty of the text in the immediacy of the work. They may be able to get through the book, but they compromise their reading process. Once readers habituate these inefficient practices, they engage them even in the easiest of texts. Melody and Jan have both witnessed this time and time again.

## Dueling Definitions of Instructional Reading Level

Consider the following examples of instructional-level text that we've created based on the story of *Goldilocks and the Three Bears*. The story contains exactly 100 words. The words in **bold** represent errors constituting 95% accuracy, the lower end of the limitations in Betts's definition of instructional level. Imagine that these errors represent problem-solving interruptions in the flow of reading and subsequent comprehension.

Once upon a time, a family of three bears lived in a little **house** in the woods. One **morning**, the bear family left to walk, because their food was too hot to eat. A girl went into their house. She **found** the food and ate from the bowl that was not too hot or too cold. She sat in the best chair and **broke** it in two. She tried all three bear beds and went to sleep in Baby Bear's bed. When the three bears came home, they saw her in the little bed. She was **afraid** and ran home.

If we expand on this example, we can imagine that the hypothetical reader also made a couple of self-corrections. These self-corrections, although they indicate cue integration and strategy consolidation, interrupt fluency and comprehension as well.

With five errors and two self-corrections, one could reasonably argue that there is plenty of work for the student in the example above; there are five solid opportunities for the student to problem-solve making the text a reasonable challenge, and there are two opportunities for the student to reflect on efficient patterns of behavior. This work is sufficient (bordering on too much) for the student to learn something new. The following example, which represents more recent interpretations of instructional

reading level, includes too many disruptions to a student's reading process, with the student reading at 90% accuracy:

Once upon a time, a **family** of three bears lived in a little **house** in the woods. One **morning**, the bear family left to walk, **because** their food was too hot to eat. A girl went into their house. She **found** the food and ate from the bowl that was not too hot or too cold. She sat in the best **chair** and **broke** it in two. She **tried** all three bear beds and went to sleep in Baby Bear's bed. When the three bears came home, they **saw** her in the little bed. She was **afraid** and ran home.

Imagine again, that the student also self-corrected twice. Also imagine that the student is one of six students in a guided reading group, all of whom are making this many errors. This error volume may mean that students compromise their reading processes en masse while teachers struggle, usually with marginal success, to support them.

One might argue that the bottom end of Betts's parameters for instructional reading level overlap with the upper ends of the more common parameters, implying that students could work in easier texts without shifting the 90–95% definition. Teachers, however, like Mr. Stevenson, are under tremendous pressure to work with students in grade-level texts. So, many teachers understandably push these basal boundaries, placing students in the most challenging texts within instructional-level parameters. Because many teachers must report to parents or district supervisors the level at which their students read, giving students texts that fit the Betts definition of instructional reading level makes it look as if their students are behind.

Unfortunately, most teachers only have to report the reading level; more often than not, there is little reporting attention given to the quality of the reading process within that level (e.g., comprehension measures, fluency, self-correcting behaviors). Under such pressure, many teachers are inclined to let students work in texts they read with around 90% accuracy, general comprehension, and marginal fluency. Unfortunately, because of extensive work in these inappropriate texts, many students and teachers have a paradigm for how instructional-level reading looks and sounds, which they actually developed while working with frustration-level text.

Although historically educators have interpreted the term *instructional reading level* as the level at which students will benefit most from

direct instruction in reading, we tend to think of it a little differently. Instructional reading level, as we have observed it, is the level at which a student has a strong enough reading process to learn from the work. So, rather than a source for teaching students how to use strategies, instructional-level text allows students who already have a repertoire of strategies strong enough to support them to attend to dimensions of the text that may be new to them (i.e., instructing themselves), whether it is new in terms of print, story, integration, or simply content.

The adoption of 90–95% word recognition as a guideline for instructional reading level seems to have spilled over from the Reading Recovery model, which is clearly a highly effective program for teaching students to read. Reading Recovery lessons, however, occur in one-on-one instructional contexts, which allow the highly trained Reading Recovery teacher to intimately know the readers' strengths and weaknesses. These individualized contexts are considerably different from classroom settings where teachers work with groups of students. We maintain that the demands of supporting one student who can potentially make 10 errors differ greatly from the demands of supporting four to six students who can potentially, and often do, make 40–60 errors. Furthermore, the spirit of Clay's work closely aligns with supporting the integrated processing of young readers over a drive to push them into "challenging text."

## **Clay's Smoothly Operating System**

In *Reading Recovery: A Guidebook for Teachers in Training*, Clay (1993) writes about supporting students' reading behaviors as they develop a smoothly operating system for reading. She emphasizes the need to observe students and build upon reading behaviors over which the student has control. Clay writes,

When one is having difficulty with a task one tries several approaches. As each fails one ceases to try them. The struggling reader has stopped using many strategies because he could not make them work. If you pitch the text at an easy level and you support him in using the things he can do you will find that he begins to try again some of these discarded strategies.  
(pp. 13–14)

In *Becoming Literate: The Construction of Inner Control*, Clay (1991) writes, "Learners do what they do well, and supported by this context

they go beyond control they already have. *Therefore, the reader needs the kind of text on which his reading behavior system works well*" (pp. 214–215). She says much about working within what students solidly understand, moving them into new learning very slowly, and always offering massive practice to develop automaticity. Clay's (2005a) idea that real reading is an act of "fast perceptual processing" (p. 43) to the text is contrary to the model of guided reading instruction that allows students to pore over the text as they sort through a checklist of strategies.

Most of us define *strategies* as the tools we coach students to engage overtly when problem-solving, but Clay (1993) describes *strategies* as "these fast reactions used while reading" (p. 39). She continues, explaining that "monitoring and problem-solving strategies or operations going on in the student's head are more powerful than some of the weaker, overt procedures that teachers have encouraged students to use, like sounding out the word or reading on" (p. 39). We maintain that students cannot engage these fast, in-the-head strategies in texts that are difficult for them. Rather, they rely heavily on teachers to tell them which strategies to use and when to use them.

Clay (1993) does suggest giving students challenging texts, but we think her definition of *challenging* has been misinterpreted. She explains that text should be "just challenging enough," and "to achieve smooth integration of all the processing activities the teacher will sometimes need to drop the difficulty level of text until things are working well" (p. 52). So, guided reading is about learning the *orchestration* of behaviors rather than about the individual behaviors themselves.

The smooth integration of information occurs during the guided work, rather than students hobbling through a text leaning toward print or story and *then* smoothly orchestrating their reading when they move to independent reading. The reading process we expect students to practice in independence mirrors the reading process they are enacting during guided reading. If their reading process is fragmented, carried by the teacher, or uneven during guided reading, they are likely to carry this inefficiency into their independent application. Toward the end of supporting your efforts to help students develop smoothly operating systems for negotiating text, we offer the suggestions in the following section.



## Working Through the Tricky Parts

### ***Strategy #5: Teach Students From Books in Which They Can Practice a Balanced Reading Process***

The inevitable difficulty of teaching students to read challenges us to balance the needs of individuals against the needs of the group. Like most literacy educators, we commonly administer an assessment and determine instructional reading level for our students. (We use the Betts 95–98% word recognition criteria.) Although these determinations give us quantitative descriptions of where our students can read comfortably, we look deeper to consider the qualitative ways students interact with text. That is, how does each student utilize print and story information?

You can base your grouping decisions on the numbers from your assessments and also consider the affective behaviors of the students. Set aside the level of the text and listen to the students read from a series of assessment materials. What is the most difficult level at which each student sounds like a reader who is putting all, or most, of the pieces together? What is the last level at which students can support themselves, the level just before their process becomes disjointed?

So, even if there are higher levels of text in which the students can stumble through 90% of the words correctly, perhaps only after a number of self-corrections (i.e., they have read less than 90% of the words without interruptions to comprehension), find the level where the students can actually integrate cues efficiently, even if that means letting them work within much easier text. This placement will allow you to observe the ways that students actually work through texts, the strategies that they can then carry into independence. Grouping toward process can also inform your decisions when half of a group is at one level and the other half is at another level. For example, if you have five readers with three reading at 96% accuracy in a Level F text and two reading at 96% accuracy in a Level E text, given that the students reading comfortably in Level E are frustrated in Level F, err toward the easier text and group all of the students in Level E. This adjustment will benefit all five students, because the reading process is the same in a Level E text as it is in a Level F text. If the students in Level E, however, are moved into Level F texts, they are likely to compromise their reading processes to meet the demands of the harder text, habituating compensatory strategies.

We have seen this process, which requires a fair amount of faith on the part of the teacher, pay off time and time again. When students who are consolidating cues smoothly work in slightly easier text for a while, they still make tremendous growth. It is not uncommon for students reading successfully within “just-difficult-enough texts” (Clay, 1993, p. 53) to make leaps of multiple levels between benchmark assessments.

Consider the following vignette:

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Mrs. Ramen, a first-grade teacher in a school with a 95% poverty rate, decides to test this philosophy. This past school year, she measured guided reading instructional level according to Betts’s 95–98% word accuracy, solid comprehension, and freedom from tension. The 15-minute guided reading session includes an introductory discussion and a picture walk before the first reading. After a conversation about the text, time still remains in the lessons for the students to reread a familiar text. Throughout the year, Mrs. Ramen retrains herself whenever she is inclined to move students into more difficult text. She makes sure each student has a smoothly operating reading process in a level before they move into more difficult text. This propensity sometimes means that she works with individual students to support particular strategies or that she revisits a strategy with the larger group.

Her restraint pays off; all of the students, based on Betts’s parameters, started the year reading at Level A or B. At the end of the year, 12 could read at or somewhat above Level I and three struggling readers read fluently at Level F, all with 95–98% word recognition accuracy, solid comprehension, and strong fluency.

Contrary to common wisdom, the students do not steadily climb up levels, working through each level successively as the year progresses. Instead, the students linger in some early text levels long enough to establish an efficient reading process and consolidate new strategies. Due to Mrs. Ramen’s attention to her students’ reading processes, some students actually skip text levels. This decision pays off on the high-stakes reading test the students take in the spring; furthermore, they develop confidence and independence in their reading.

Table 5 summarizes the students’ reading progress.

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**Table 5. Student Reading Progress Across the Year**

Group	Aug.	Sept.	Oct.	Nov.	Dec.	Jan.	Feb.	Mar.	Apr.	May
1	A	A	B	B	C	C	D	E	E	F
2	A	B	C	C	D	D	E	E	E	G
3	A	B	C	D	E	E	F	F	F	H
4	B	C	D	E	E	E	F	F	G	I

As a Reading Recovery teacher, Melody witnessed yearly the truth of Clay's (1993) instruction to provide text that was "just-difficult-enough" (p. 53). One particular student from Melody's Reading Recovery experience exemplifies the power of easier text to promote a well-orchestrated reading process. Tonya, a second-round Reading Recovery student, had many inefficient reading habits that she learned in her early school experience. After 18 weeks of daily instruction, Melody had a fellow Reading Recovery instructor test Tonya to see if she could discontinue from the program. The proctor recorded the testing session and sent it to the district Reading Recovery director for approval.

A day later, Melody's supervisor informed her that, even though Tonya had scored at instructional reading level with 90% word recognition accuracy on Level J text, she could not discontinue from the program until her fluency improved. "Work on fluency for 2 weeks, have her retested, and send me the tapes," read the note at the top of Tonya's Level J running record. Melody initially disagreed with her supervisor. "If you only knew how far Tonya has come," reflected Melody, as she reached for boxes of leveled texts that would hopefully develop Tonya's fluency.

Contrary to common practice, Melody did not place Tonya in Level J books. Instead, Tonya read and reread daily for the next two weeks from familiar texts and novel texts that were in much easier levels, C through G. Much like Christopher, who had to move into much easier pieces of music even though he could play a few sophisticated pieces, Tonya had to work once again in easier text to practice and habituate a smoothly operating reading process.

With support, Tonya's reading process in simpler text evolved into a self-extending system. After two weeks and retesting, Tonya read a

difficult novel, Level K text with 94% word recognition accuracy, solid comprehension, and strong fluency. Melody was amazed that Tonya had progressed so dramatically, even while practicing in Levels C through G, three levels below her “instructional” reading level. Melody’s supervisor said, “Tonya sounds like a different student. Congratulations, Tonya has discontinued the program.” Melody tacked those words to her bulletin board to remind her of the lesson she learned concerning the ways easy texts can actually be “just right” for helping students develop a smooth, integrated reading process.

### ***Strategy #6: Increase Your Sensitivity to Reader Distress***

Jan has worked with many students and teachers in guided reading contexts in the last 10 years and found it common for teachers, even those with tremendous literacy expertise, to work with students in books that are truly beyond their reach. In fact, the teachers who are most knowledgeable about literacy are particularly prone to placing students in difficult reading levels, because these teachers know how to scaffold to make the text more manageable. In the end, however, the teacher does most of the work, the text remains too hard for the students, and the students develop inefficient habits. Once teachers understand this cause and effect, they exclaim, “I can’t believe I was doing that! I know better!” We have been guilty of this, too.

There seems to be some element of human nature, or perhaps it is increasing outside pressure, that drives us to push students. In so doing, we assume more and more responsibility for the work, and the students slip in confidence and skill. So, even if you are now conscious of the need to work with students in accessible texts, insidious tendencies toward agendas of pushing through the levels may still creep in. We offer Table 6 to help you recognize when a text may or may not be appropriate for your students.

To help you check yourself, we also offer this list, which is aligned to Table 6, of five questions you can consistently use to reflect on your guided reading lessons. These “five handy helpers” for guided reading teachers can help you automate certain processes for constantly cross-checking your understandings of guided reading against the behaviors of your students:

**Table 6. Student Behaviors That May Indicate Appropriate Student-to-Text Match**

Text That Is Too Difficult	Text That Is Just Right
Students are off task, nervous, or engaged in inappropriate behaviors.	Students are focused on the text during guided reading sessions and engage in conversations about their work.
Students read haltingly. Their reading may include excessive repetitions or self-corrections or require extensive teacher support.	Students sound like good readers most of the time, with occasional stops to problem-solve. Most problem-solving is independent.
The lesson takes more than 15–20 minutes, because the teacher has to instruct extensively. There is often frequent problem-solving.	The lesson lasts 15–20 minutes. Instruction is mostly (or all) around reflecting on what worked.
The teacher has to support all readers and cannot shift attention to administer a running record on one student or make notes about the lesson.	The teacher makes notes on the guided reading session and makes a running record on one student.
The teacher is frustrated and tired from extensive explanations and frequent prompting.	The teacher is quiet and listening for much of the session.

1. *How did the students feel?* If the students showed signs of tension as they worked through the text, the text may have been too difficult. Tension manifests in many ways: Students may fidget or wiggle in their seats, display excessive repetitions in their reading, or simply offer spontaneous deep sighs. A smoothly operating process should support the students in a successful reading experience. Did the students enjoy the guided reading lesson? If not, check the text level.
2. *How did the reading sound?* Was most of the reading smooth for the students? How often did the processes that should be mostly automatic in instructional-level texts demand the conscious attention of the reader? If the students had to stop to solve problems, were they mostly able to figure them out with minimal support? If the students consciously worked on more than 3–5% of the words, read laboringly, were unable to solve most problems independently, or struggled to understand the text, then it was probably too hard. Most guided reading should look

like a group of solid readers flying solo with their teacher waiting in the wings to catch, encourage, and observe them.

3. *How long was the session?* If you have to spend more than one day on the same work or are stuck in a text working on different processes on different days (e.g., a day to work through the words, a day to navigate the meaning, a day to practice fluency), then the text is too hard. If the text requires that you squeeze the entire gradual release of responsibility into guided reading, then you need to pick a different book.
4. *What records did you take?* If you were so involved with supporting the students that you were unable to take anecdotal records or administer a running record during the lesson, then the book was probably too hard. If the teacher shifts focus to documentation and the students' reading grinds to a painful halt with students operating at varying degrees of being stuck, then reexamine the text. You should be able to record one student's reading behavior without the reading processes of the other students falling apart.
5. *How hard did you work?* If you, the teacher, are saying "Whew!" at the end of a lesson and trying to catch your breath, then you may want to look at your text choice. If you are doing the heavy lifting of the lesson, then your students are probably missing valuable opportunities to practice their integrated reading process and may even be developing habits of dependency. More often than not, the students should be more tired than you after a guided reading lesson.

Internalizing these five questions can help you keep in check the natural tendencies toward oversupporting and pushing through levels that we all sometimes indulge. You might keep this list in your notebook for documenting your guided reading work and review it at the beginning of each lesson until it becomes an automatic part of your thinking.

### ***Strategy #7: Select Guided Reading Texts Based on Student Reading Processes***

Most of the critical planning of guided reading instruction rests in the teacher's text selection. This work involves considering the background knowledge of the group in terms of print and story. In addition, text

selection requires us to consider our students' reading processes very thoughtfully.

Various tools exist for supporting teachers as they consider texts in relation to the readers in a group; however, most tools have a heavy print focus. Again, we do not suggest that you become casual about print considerations of a particular text. Rather, we suggest you become even more serious about story and integration considerations. Clay (1993) writes, "Choose the reading book very carefully. First of all take meaning and language into account" (p. 36).

To select texts toward reading process rather than simply by level adds a layer of complexity to the task. First, we need to understand each student's reading process in a given level. Jan has worked extensively with teachers and supported their use of a "visual vocabulary" to graphically represent the ways that students process information while reading. They represent the process by drawing the appropriate Venn diagram, like those we presented in the Introduction. As you consider which of these Venn diagrams represent each of your students, you can let these understandings inform your text selections.

**Selecting Texts for Students Who Favor Story Cues.** For a student who relies too heavily on story, teachers can select text that requires students to attend to dimensions of print. If only a few students have this challenge, the teacher may support student shifts from story to print in small-group, shared reading lessons, or individual reading conferences. In selecting texts that encourage print attention, teachers might consider the following questions:

- Are the print elements within the control of the student? Shifting attention is enough work. Once the student refocuses, will he or she be able to manage the print? You may need to move to even easier text if you are trying to help a student break a bad habit.
- Is the language of the text natural and within the student's control? Some texts that support increased attention to print sacrifice natural language structures for the sake of phonetic reliability. If you are using a story that is patterned with a particular word family, for example, make sure there are illustrations that add depth to the text and that the words are not nonsensical.

- Are the story dimensions of the text, as they align one-to-one with print, limited enough to require the student to attend to print? For example, a text with a picture of a black dog right above the words *black dog* will not encourage the student to access the print.
- Are the story elements of the text, particularly the illustrations, complete enough to support confirming, cross-checking, and even deep comprehension? Even though you want the student to shift some focus to print, you don't want to go to an extreme in the other direction. Always reconnect with other cues.

**Selecting Texts for Students Who Favor Print Cues.** Just the opposite of the reader we just described, some readers engage “sounding out” behaviors almost exclusively. These students need texts that push them to turn their attention to alternate cues. The following questions may help you select texts for students who rely heavily on decoding, even when it is not efficient:

- Are the story elements within the control of the student? Shifting attention from print is enough work for students. Once the student refocuses, will he or she be able to understand the story elements the text provides? You may have to move to even easier text if you are trying to help a student break a bad habit.
- Are there multiple story elements to support the student? For example, texts with a consistent pattern and a close picture–print match will present students with more than one aspect of story to which they can direct their attention. Consider availability of story aspects, such as rhyme, language structure, print–picture alignment, and repetitive patterns, and background knowledge of the student.
- How will the print support the student's efforts? This support may vary, depending on the student and the text. In some situations, using texts that are more difficult to decode will help the student shift attention to story elements that are not limited by the print. On the other hand, maintaining enough manageable print to afford confirming story cues is generally productive as it connects the student to a complete reading process.

**Selecting Texts for Students Who Do Not Comprehend Deeply.** Some students read texts superficially. They can answer basic questions (e.g.,



what did the boy eat?) and give a general retelling of the story, but they don't work to connect meaning across the text or to their own background knowledge. For these students, you might consider the following as you select texts:

- To what big ideas does this text lend itself? Select texts that have ideas within and around other ideas. If there is one right answer to the questions to which the story lends itself, the text may not be rich enough for the work.
- What does the story offer readers as they work to engage in a sophisticated reading process? Are there opportunities within the text to access different ways of thinking about texts? Can you think of comprehension questions that will encourage students to put together multiple strategies?
- How do the illustrations bring depth to the comprehension work? Even Level A texts can have complex stories embedded in the illustrations. Look for understandings that students can discover in the pictures, which teach them to think about the story as they are reading.
- Is the print within the control of the student? If figuring out the print interrupts the reading, students will not be able to efficiently attend to the meaning of the story.

**Selecting Texts for Students Who Do Not Self-Correct.** Some students leave many errors uncorrected, which may or may not disrupt their understanding of the text. Some errors may make sense on a sentence level but compromise the deeper understandings across the story. Either way, excessive, uncorrected errors indicate that students are not monitoring themselves as they read. The following list offers suggestions specific to particular error patterns:

- For students who make excessive errors that make sense on the sentence level, see the strategy for breaking inefficient habits in Chapter 5. For these students, it may be impossible to find a text that is on their instructional reading level in terms of word recognition until you break the habit. Then, you are likely to see rapid progress.
- For students who do not correct errors even when they don't make sense, teach them to ask themselves after each sentence, did that

make sense? Initially, this process is cumbersome and should be practiced in a shared reading context with a group that has similar reading patterns. Eventually, the questioning will become internalized and part of a student's reading process.

- In what ways will this text support behaviors that mirror the work of proficient readers? Basically, text needs to have print and story elements that are redundant, so students can learn to confirm one against the other.

This list is not exhaustive in terms of student reading processes and the ways they may inform your text selection. Rather, the list represents strategic ways of looking at guided reading texts through the lens of student reading. Examining texts thoughtfully in terms of story and print information in particular, as these support the specific reading processes of your students, will help you identify those texts that scaffold students.

Most important in terms of text selection, the guided reading book must be manageable for the readers. It is critical that we select a text that

is well within the child's control, uses words and letters he knows or can get to by using the present strategies. There should be a minimum of new things to learn if the teaching goal is the integration of all these aspects of the task. (Clay, 1993, p. 36)

By giving students texts they can manage, we nurture and solidify their abilities to integrate and consolidate various sources of information efficiently and practice the smoothly operating system that is the bedrock of learning to read.

### ***Strategy #8: Clarify Confusions When Problem-Solving Efforts Prove Unproductive***

Even when we know our students well and are highly knowledgeable about selecting texts that place instructional-level demands on them, we sometimes choose texts that don't match the needs of our students. It is impossible to always have a perfect match between texts and students. Generally, the result is simply that the students are trying to read books that are too hard for them. In these cases, teachers might change the guided reading session to a read-aloud or shared reading experience. Either of these are better options than carrying students through the text

with excessive prompting, because read-aloud and shared reading do not fragment student reading processes or encourage students to work inefficiently.

If, on the other hand, you do decide that the book is generally appropriate for students, despite a temporary setback, don't let them remain stuck. When students are woefully mired in confusion, and you don't want to change the text altogether, go ahead and tell them what they need to know to move on to more productive work. It would seem that we are suggesting you engage in a practice that is in contradiction both with what we have already said and also with commonly accepted best practices. Our suggestion to tell students words when they are stuck or to explicitly clarify story confusion, however, is very context specific.

Because teachers understand the inverse relationship between telling and student independence, they are understandably adamant about letting students figure out the words. We suggest, however, that telling has received a universally bad rap. Sometimes, in the interest of saving time and avoiding frustration, we need to tell students what we wish they already knew. For example, students sometimes pore over a word, locked into some inaccuracy. There is something that they simply have wrong, and we keep prompting them to try again, giving them increasingly supportive clues. We may offer hints or suggestions, while the student continues to labor over the text. This happens with story work as well, as teachers work to support the inquiry and the higher order thinking that researchers define as critical to learning. Consider the following exchange during a guided reading lesson:

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Ms. Wilson opens a guided reading lesson in her second-grade classroom by saying, "Does anyone know what a grader is?" The students shake their heads. "Are you sure?" she asks and waits in an effort to provide them sufficient wait time.

George responds confidently, "It is something you use for grades in school."

"What do you mean?" Ms. Wilson responds.

"Like a calculator. A teacher uses it."

"Hmmm," says Ms. Wilson. "So you are saying that a grader is a calculator that a teacher would use to figure out grades for a report card. That's interesting. Does anyone else have any ideas?"

No one responds.

"Let me give you a hint. It has something to do with road construction and big trucks."

There is a long pause while Ms. Wilson waits.

"Oh, I get it," says Chris finally. "A grader is something someone uses to give grades to the people who drive the big trucks. This is how they know if they are doing a good job on the road."

"Hmmm, that's interesting," says Ms. Wilson. "Anyone else have an idea?"

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Imagine that this discussion continues until most of the time for guided reading instruction is lost. Ms. Wilson is trying to support the inquiry of her students. However, she is actually confusing them and taking up valuable time. The students have grabbed onto the only connection they have to grading and are trying to make it fit the current context. Ms. Wilson, although well intentioned, is perpetuating this confusion, which, even if she clarifies it at this point, may follow some of them into their reading of the text.

Because the students do not have sufficient background knowledge, they are unable to piece together the information efficiently. Inquiry such as Ms. Wilson's actually becomes a guessing game. Guessing, whether with print or story, based on no information or inaccurate information is usually unproductive and can perpetuate inefficient reading behaviors. Table 7 offers insights to support your decisions around whether to let students puzzle through problems or clarify their misunderstandings, so they can move on to more beneficial work.

There are no universal rules for telling or not telling. For each problem-solving experience, teachers weigh the momentum of the session, the needs of the student, and the demands of the text. Our goal is for students to develop fluency as they orchestrate the in-the-head processes they are developing. Grueling print or story work is inefficient and actually impedes our efforts. When students are desperately stuck, whether with story, print, or integration, tell them. If this happens frequently with a student, examine the level of text you are using, as it may be too difficult.

**Table 7. To Tell or Not to Tell**

When You Might Tell	When You Probably Shouldn't Tell
A student offers the same incorrect response even after redirection.	The student tries a new strategy, particularly if it incorporates a new cueing system or brings the student closer to solving the problem.
The print work seriously interrupts the meaning work.	You see the student searching in ways you think will be productive.
Story confusion leads students to reinvent the print, or print confusion leads them to make up the story.	A student, confused by story, is searching the print for clarification, or vice versa.
The student doesn't try anything, and other behaviors indicate that the text is too hard.	The student doesn't try anything, and other behaviors or your knowledge of the student indicate that he or she wants you to do the work.
The student makes a few failed attempts to find or correct the error after reading the sentence.	The student is in the middle of a sentence and makes an error.

## Putting It All Together

In this chapter, we take apart one of the tenets of reading instruction that forms the cornerstone of guided reading: instructional reading level. We do not question these bedrock assumptions without years of thought and experience, and openness to your explorations of whether this truth holds up in your contexts. The paradigm shift we endorse is colossal, and therefore we encourage you to explore it aggressively before stepping into it.

We agree with Allington (2006), who asserts that “some children don’t develop adequate fluency or rate of reading,” because “they have limited reading practice in appropriately leveled materials” (p. 95), and “you can’t learn much from texts you can’t read” (Allington, 2002, p. 16). This chapter encourages you to reflect on students’ reading abilities, knowing that the text, rather than the teacher, supports students as they develop a self-extending system. This reflection can give you faith as you consider text levels, skill in managing the chemistry between readers and texts, and patience as you nurture and watch for the coming of wonders.

## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND CONVERSATION

1. What are your understandings about instructional reading level, and how were they challenged or supported by this chapter?
2. Do you have students in guided reading groups who seem to be stuck in a particular level? In what ways might the level of the text contribute to their lack of forward movement? What will you do next?
3. What visual representations of the reading process presented in the Introduction illustrate the reading processes of your students? How do you know?
4. Are your students successful in guided reading? How do you know?
5. How do your students' reading processes influence the ways you select texts for them?
6. With what in this chapter do you agree? Why? With what do you disagree? Why?